Baines D. (2008). Has pharmacy run out of time? The Pharmaceutical Journal. 291: 21

Has pharmacy run out of time?

Does the 60th anniversary of the NHS mark the turning-point in a cycle in the history of community pharmacy? Darrin Baines, a health systems analyst from Birmingham, investigates.

Summary

The NHS marks its 60th anniversary on 5 July 2008. This unique institution was born out of the political struggle to create a comprehensive welfare state in post-war Britain. Based upon an unco-ordinated, uneven distribution of private and charity providers, the establishment of a universal service for all was an ideological goal initially difficult to attain.

Before the introduction of free health services, community pharmacy outside rural areas was primarily divided into two forms of providers. First, chemists and druggists who had their own premises located primarily in middle-class, shopping streets in affluent towns.

Next, social insurance-funded dispensaries that provided medicines to working men and their families in industrialised areas. In the country, on the other hand, most drugs were compounded and supplied by the prescribing doctor not the dispensing pharmacist.

With their goal of egalitarianism, the founders of the NHS aimed to provide the same quality service to all, regardless of age, income or locality. Consequently, a hybrid-model based upon the pharmacist-owned pharmacy outlet, prevalent in prosperous areas, was chosen to be spread throughout the UK.

Although economic conditions, technology and government policies have substantially changed since July 1948, this model persists. As discussed below, this may be because of the “institutionalisation” of community pharmacy, which has had the effect of protecting the premises-based, pharmacist-led model.

Birthdays are a time for celebration, reflection and thinking ahead. They are a mixture of the everyday and a celebratory interval outside normal time. In this spirit, this article reflects upon community pharmacy's past, present and future, exploring both the extraordinary and the mundane. In particular, the significance of the number 60 in shaping the evolution of community pharmacy since its birth in the 1750s is explored.

Against this background, the notion of path dependency is introduced to show how the institutions of the NHS shape and protect the “one-pharmacist, one-premises” — which we will call the “one, one” model. After analysing the past, this article concludes that, within 30 years, community pharmacy will enter a new stage, the “sixth wave”. At this time, the structure of community-based dispensing will radically change, and the community pharmacist of today will all but disappear.

Although this year's anniversary will be publicised as an important milestone in NHS history, the fact that the number 60 is significant in a wider sense will probably go unreported. For instance, the 60th wedding anniversary is a major milestone celebrated with the gift of a diamond; a word that has roots in the Greek adamas meaning “endurance and longevity”.

The number 60, therefore, signifies stamina and maturity, and the current anniversary should remind us that, in the face of environmental pressures, the NHS and its original pharmacy model still survive.

The number 60 not only measures the passing of time symbolically, but it also forms the basis of our modern calendar. The Sumerian civilisation introduced the sexagesimal system of time in approximately 2,000 BC. Consequently, we now have 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, and a calendar with 60 times six (plus a few) days in a year.

Given that the NHS is now 60 years old, the sexagesimal system suggests that this anniversary may be more significant than others.